

## **Football league format remains intact**

Niagara high school football has changed so that all its leagues will play three-down football instead of the four-down variety, but its three-league format will remain with several additions and subtractions.

Last November, the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association voted in favour of two leagues, AAAA/AAA and AA/A, based on population. Schools with populations exceeding 900 would play in the upper league and schools with fewer than 900 students would play in the lower league. That has changed.

"We broke the under-900 (population) schools into two smaller divisions. When the coaches got together, they decided there was enough schools in each division to have a go and enough trophies to go around," football convenor Rick Willis said.

The new format will see 10 teams playing in the AAAA/AAA league, seven teams competing in the AA loop and six teams contesting the A crown.

Lakeshore Catholic, Notre Dame, St. Mike's, St. Paul, Denis Morris and Blessed Trinity will be joined in the AAA/AAAA league by Sir Winston Churchill, A,N, Myer, Stamford and Westlane. They will start their games during the second week of school and will play a nine-game schedule in eight weeks. After league play is over, the top two teams will play an elimination game to decide who moves on to the bowl playdowns. The loser then gets a bye into the league final and the third- through sixth-placed teams will then battle to see who moves on to play in the league final.

Grimsby, which has been unable to compete successfully in the Varsity 1 league for the past several seasons, has opted out of playing in the AAA/AAAA loop and instead will play four exhibition games against schools in the AA league. Grimsby teacher Mark Gilbert replaced Pete Mitchell as head coach of the program.

"They're one year away from playing the bigger schools," Willis said.

Making up the AA loop will be Governor Simcoe, Holy Cross, St. Francis, Beamsville, Eden, St. Catharines Collegiate and Centennial. Ridley College, which played against those schools last season, will not be playing in the Niagara league this season.

The AA league will play a six-game regular season and six squads will qualify for the playoffs. The top two teams advance directly to the semifinals and the next four teams will fight it out to see who joins them in the semifinals. Each team will have a bye week. Eden, St. Catharines Collegiate, Beamsville and Centennial will play exhibitions against Grimsby during their bye weeks.

The A league will be made up of West Park, Port Colborne, South Lincoln, Thorold, Eastdale and Ridgeway/Crystal Beach. Ridgeway/Crystal Beach replaces Fort Erie which has decided not to field a team this season. For obvious reasons, Niagara District won't field a team this season.

"They (Fort Erie) will more than likely come on board the first week of school with a junior team," Willis said.

Teams in the A league will play a five-game regular season with every team making the playoffs. The top two teams will earn byes into the semifinals.

The NRHSAA has also created a junior developmental league for a few years until the participating schools are ready to play in the existing junior league.

"We have not met as of yet and hopefully by the second or third week of school, they will also have a schedule posted," Willis said.

Drafts of the schedules were posted on the District School Board of Niagara's website this week. The AAA/AAAA league will start Sept. 17, the AA loops kicks off Sept. 22 and the A league will begin play Sept. 23.